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CIA: Israel Has 10-20 A-Weapons

By Arthur Kranish

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Israel is estimated to have 10 to 20 nuclear weapons "ready and available for use," according to senior officials of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The same officials, answering questions on a broad range of topics at a rare, semi-public briefing last week, described the Soviet space program as a "shambles" following a series of major launch failures. The Soviets have apparently abandoned any plans for manned lunar landings, they said.

The non-classified briefing at CIA headquarters was held for Washington-area

members of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics. Approximately 150 persons paid \$3.50 to have cocktails, a light buffet and close to two hours of discussion with top-ranking CIA officials.

The guests were told in advance not to bring cameras or to take notes and were requested at the meeting not to "quote us to the press." A few of the guests, like myself, were reporters.

CIA officials said the agency's decision to hold such briefings reflects a policy to present a more "open" CIA in the wake of damaging press and congressional disclosures of past illegal and questionable activities.

The only previous briefing was held for graduates of the Harvard Business School, CIA officials indicated.

Last summer it was reported in the press that Israel had about 10 nuclear weapons. Last week's briefing was apparently the first time, however, that CIA officials made a public estimate of Israel's nuclear capability. No further details were given.

Asked to assess Soviet technology, the intelligence

agency officials stressed their belief that the Soviets have significant research capabilities, but have a problem in applying advanced technology.

As one example, an official said, Soviet scientists can design advanced electronic circuitry but "don't know how to build a clean room"—the rust-free facility needed for electronic assembly work. Such "clean rooms" are common in U.S. laboratories and electronic manufacturing plants.

On the Soviet space program, the CIA officials said:

- There are signs that a large Soviet installation built for manned launches has been in mothballs for two or three years.

- It appears that three large boosters, twice the size of U.S. Saturn V rockets, have blown up.

- U.S. specialists believe the Soviets' decision to emphasize building large "brute force" rockets has

caused them problems because such large rockets won't work for manned lunar missions.

- The Soviet small satellite launch program is still active and ambitious but appears to be several years behind the United States in payloads.

The CIA officials indicated their belief that reliable satellite reconnaissance capabilities are essential to the SALT (strategic arms limitation) agreements.

On the subject of recent press and congressional investigations of the CIA, the officials said that "99 per cent" of public disclosures were handed to Congress "on a silver platter" by the CIA as a result of the agency's internal study of abuses begun in 1973. That study resulted in a 693-page report written before the first news stories appeared, they said.

The officials criticized press reporting of CIA activities as containing much misinformation and were bitter about those who disclose names of CIA employees and endanger lives. They said that former CIA man Philip Agee had endangered many persons and "ruined many fine careers" by naming names.

They pointed to the killing of CIA station chief Richard Welch in Athens as an example of what can happen if CIA employees' identities are revealed.

But they said that the disclosures and controversy about the CIA have not hurt agency recruitment.

December applications were up 22 per cent, they said. January applications were down 3 per cent from a year earlier, but quality has not suffered and the CIA is in a "100 per cent buyer's market" position, the CIA officials said.

Kranish is editor of *Science Trends*, a Washington-based newsletter.

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